

## Opinion

# Redrawing the Lines

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In an Oct. 12 Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, 48 percent of respondents said they would like to see Democrats in control of Congress. Only 39 percent would like to see Republicans keep their majority on Capitol Hill. This was the biggest divide in the 11 years that the poll has asked the question.

But as much as they like the numbers, Democrats have little chance to turn this sentiment into an electoral coup. Congressional elections hinge as much on individual candidates and community issues as they do on opinions about national partisan disagreements. After all, the expression "all politics is local," was coined by a former speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill.

Even if people were voting strictly along party lines, it's unlikely anything would change. As long as districts are drawn to protect representatives seeking re-election, Democrats are unlikely to win the 28 seats necessary to take back the majority. Districts designed by state legislatures tend to make seats "safe" by reducing party diversity. This makes most elections a foregone conclusion: Only seven of 399 incumbent members of congress lost in 2004-a 98.2 winning percentage.

But in Ohio, Florida and California, voters are being given an opportunity to challenge the way lines like these are drawn. Proposition 77, one of the initiatives in California's Nov. 8 special election, would amend the state constitution to place redistricting powers in the hands of a specially selected panel of three retired judges.

Schwarzenegger said of Ohio's redistricting measure that "perfect cannot be the enemy of good." The same could be said of Proposition 77. Previous plans have tried to create a better panel by expanding it to nine members, including citizens and other non-judges or mandating the inclusion of a woman and a member of a minority group. Unfortunately, that's little more than wishful thinking at this point.

There have indeed been better proposals, including some that were passed over in order to place this one on the ballot. Still, this is the best chance to restore some fairness and accountability to state legislative elections that we will see for some time.

California has attempted to reform its redistricting procedure by initiative in 1982 and 1990, but it failed both times. This time, a supportive governor and a broad coalition of interest groups might push it through.

That coalition of supporters is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this political contest, with progressive stalwarts CalPIRG and the national board of Common Cause siding with Schwarzenegger. Not that everyone has fallen into line: Much of Common Cause's California constituency is angry about the national organization's decision and has sided with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who is opposing the initiative.

Indeed, some on the left feel Proposition 77 is nothing more than a Republican power grab. But studies by the University of Southern California and Claremont McKenna College indicate its overall impact would be moderate and would affect both sides. The (right-of-center) Rose Institute estimated that on the congressional level, Democrats and Republicans would each lose five safe seats, but would otherwise remain similar to today.

UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies will be releasing its report today, and the Oakland Tribune expects it to downplay the impact of redistricting, as other reports have done thus far.

So why vote for change if it is so slight, if the Californians not in those 10 newly competitive districts will not receive any better representation?

Just as before, we shouldn't let the lack of a better option prevent us from seizing a good one. Restoring competition to 10 districts is better than to none, to say nothing of the state legislative districts that will be

improved. Also, USC's report notes that even safe seats will see a "moderating effect," as candidates reach across party lines in new, diverse districts.

Moreover, this election won't happen in a vacuum, and its impacts will reach beyond the state. Though success here won't guarantee it in Florida and Ohio, affirming the viability of alternatives to partisan redistricting can be invaluable in building support for other ballot initiatives.

Making Congress truly responsive to the people will likely require more than redistricting California alone, but that's all the more reason to begin the process of reform here and now.

Send your take on the Voter's Guide to [darryl@dailyca.org](mailto:darryl@dailyca.org).

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